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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [PTER](#) [CO](#)

SUBJECT: COLOMBIAN HOSTAGE ESCAPES FARC CAPTORS DURING  
COLMIL ASSAULT

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood

Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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**¶1.** (S) Former GOC Minister and six-year hostage Fernando Araujo escaped from his FARC guards during a COLMIL assault to rescue him and take down a FARC leader. The December 31 operation coincided with partying among the guerrillas, who failed to hear approaching helicopters. Araujo supplied valuable intelligence on his captors' behavior patterns, but several factors -- favorable terrain, the FARC New Year's party and Araujo's remarkable physical and psychological strength -- mean this successful outcome would not be easily duplicated with other hostages. End Summary.

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Araujo's Ordeal  
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**¶2.** (U) Former Development Minister Fernando Araujo, taken hostage by FARC guerrillas in December 2000, was liberated after six years of captivity thanks to a Colombian military attack on the camp where he was held. A December 31 air and ground assault on two FARC fronts in the Montes de Maria region of the northern department of Bolivar created sufficient confusion for Araujo to escape his guards. For some hours he remained on the camp's periphery, hearing shouting, but since the COLMIL failed to identify itself as friendly he dared not turn back. After wandering five days and over 20 miles with no food and only cactus for water, he encountered a farmer who pointed him towards a military post. He has since received medical care and reunited with his family, while attracting front-page press attention.

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COLMIL's Operation - Pluses and Minuses  
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**¶3.** (S) The press reported the assault was a joint operation by Colombian Air Force, Army, and Marines. It was guided by a FARC deserter turned informant and by intelligence gained via GOC infiltration of local militias. The lead forces were a U.S. trained unit of Colombian special forces (CCOPE) created to hunt FARC leadership targets. With U.S. intelligence support CCOPE sent two reconnaissance teams on a five-day overland trek to find the camp of combined FARC 37th and 35th fronts led by alias 'Martin Caballero.' Under

strong sun and in temperatures near 100 degrees, six special forces came close to the objective but were unable to get line-of-sight on the camp.

**¶4. (S)** Surveillance by CCOPE paved the way for the attack by commandos inserted by rope from four helicopters into the heart of the FARC camp. The operation was well executed in terms of speed and surprise; Araujo estimated that only 2-4 seconds elapsed between the sound of helicopters overhead and that of automatic weapons. Assailters met ground fire that was heavy but shortlived. Araujo's sense was that the FARC ran from the camp. Four FARC KIAs were recovered, others probably dragged away, and two additional FARC were killed in post-combat pursuit. The operation's greatest flaw was in failing to seal escape routes; Caballero's wife and two family members were killed, but the target himself got away.

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Notes on the Camp and its Leader  
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**¶5. (S)** An Embassy hostage recovery officer debriefed Araujo on FARC front habits and procedures for holding captives. Araujo was never tied, cuffed, or confined, but he was restricted to a defined area of the camp. His guards covered his eyes with his hat only during marches from one camp to another, usually at points when signs or markers would reveal his location. Araujo estimated distances between camps by counting his steps during these movements, and kept encyclopedic memories of dates, events, places, and guerrilla names. He said he never felt his guards were his friends, but they treated him well. In mid-2006 his captors spoke to him often of prospects for humanitarian exchange, saying he

would be a key part of any such deal. When President Uribe publicly endorsed military rescue operations last October, the FARC assigned him a second guard.

**¶6. (S)** Araujo had a respectful relationship with the 37th Front commander, alias Martin Caballero, whom he described as an old-style revolutionary in the tradition of Che Guevara, an ardent believer in the FARC's cause, and an avid reader of works by Castro as well as military manuals. Araujo said Caballero was inspired by the vision of Hugo Chavez but dismayed by the current reality of the weakened state of the FARC. Caballero was a strict disciplinarian who took no personal perks as front commander. Although he allowed Araujo the comfort of a hammock, Caballero himself slept on a bed of leaves on the ground, in the same manner as his rank and file.

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Tempting - But Tough - To Replicate  
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**¶7. (C)** This is the first rescue attempt since President Uribe suspended the GOC's efforts towards a humanitarian exchange, and Araujo's successful escape may encourage further such efforts. Some hostages' family members protested the policy due to the risk such operations pose to victims, especially given FARC avowals to murder hostages in case of attempted rescue. In the Araujo case, the family had explicitly authorized a rescue attempt, and President Uribe spoke with the hostage's father just prior to launch. This suggests a case-by-case approach, pursuing rescues only when families consent.

**¶8. (C)** Araujo's liberation combined elements that would be difficult to replicate. On the morning of New Year's Eve, camp occupants were drinking and dancing, with some already drunk. Araujo heard helicopters approach for two minutes before they flew overhead, but the revelers did not notice. If not for the loud music, Araujo said, the camp would have emptied before the assault began. Also, Araujo's high value to the FARC meant that his guards had orders to keep him alive. Araujo was saved by his own quick decision to flee, narrowly dodging bullets, as well as his survival grit. The terrain also played a part; this camp was in an isolated area

where water was scarce, FARC escape corridors few, and FARC forces thinly spread. FARC-held hostages in southern Colombia would be more difficult to access.

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Comment  
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¶9. (C) The operation would have worked better, Araujo would have been safer, and Martin Caballero might not have escaped if the reconnaissance teams, or some other method, had been able to determine the camp configuration in advance.

¶10. (C) Post will send septel with more detailed information obtained from Araujo debriefings.

WOOD